

Building *a better* Afghan army

Airmen mentors help country fend for itself

by Staff Sgt. Carlos Diaz, photos by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio Ricardo

Not all the facilities at Kabul's central maintenance depot have undergone renovation. In this metal shop, Afghan Soldiers and civilian workers still work in a dingy, dilapidated warehouse.

Dodging, swerving and weaving through the heavy traffic, Senior Master Sgt. Al Marasse knows just how dangerous the streets are in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Driving through the capital city's streets, the rubble, ash and rebar piercing through the shattered concrete walls of deserted buildings remind him of a suicide bomber's

deadly intent. He keeps his eyes open for danger.

The sergeant's precarious daily commute is part of his job as a senior operations mentor in an embedded training team helping stand up the fledgling Afghan National Army. It's a job he knows will one day help take the burden off NATO forces, which now provide the Afghans most of their battle support.



A handful of Airmen help the Afghan National Army develop processes to improve the logistical capabilities of its central maintenance depot in Kabul, Afghanistan. Senior Master Sgt. Alfred Marasse helps Soldier mechanics establish a supply chain for vehicle maintenance.

Just past the hustle and bustle of crowded street markets and hundreds of pedestrians, Sergeant Marasse and fellow team member, Staff Sgt. Falsen Cambre, drive their vehicle into the secure compound where they and other members of the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan work.

As his bulky frame — wrapped with 40 pounds of “battle rattle” gear — exits the vehicle, Sergeant Cambre gazes through the dusty air at a line of decaying buildings.

The time-tested, 140-year-old structures have endured much — government changes, the savage Soviet invasion and the Taliban’s merciless rule. Now they house the Afghan army’s sprawling central maintenance depot. It’s also where the Afghans store the supplies that sustain its military. Other buildings house large machines that manufacture vehicle parts and weapons. It’s a bustling place.

Embedded training teams

The embedded training teams represent all the U.S. services. Like their counterparts, the Airmen are helping ensure the depot func-

tions efficiently as Afghanistan continues fighting the war on terrorism and building its armed forces. The teams have a key goal: Help the Afghans build up their military. This will, eventually, allow Afghans to provide their own combat power and security so they can take over the fight against the Taliban and insurgents in their country.

It is not an easy job. They support and improve depot operations. But the Airmen, a baker’s dozen, are playing a key role in the Afghan army’s development into a modern, independent and self-sufficient force. The close-knit group of highly trained and dedicated Airmen redefines the word “team,” Sergeant Marasse said.

“This [effort] isn’t about us as individuals,” the sergeant said. “This is about the whole team, and what we’ve been able to accomplish together with the Afghan National Army.”

The teams have been able to accomplish quite a lot. The Airmen have been at Kabul for a year. Before deploying, the Airmen received two months of contingency skills training at Camp Shelby, Miss.



“We’re responsible for establishing a process that helps improve the ANA’s logistical capabilities,” Sergeant Marasse said. “We’re giving them the tools they need to do the job. They’re willing to do anything they can to get the job done and little successes are contagious.”

When the team arrived, the depot’s austere compound was run-down. The team’s caring approach has helped lay the foundation for the future of the depot. The groundwork began with the improvement of the depot’s aging facilities and amenities.

“This place was in dire need of the basics — the essentials,” said Sergeant Cambre, the team’s weapons mentor. “The buildings had no plumbing, electricity or windows.”

Supplying the basics

As soon as it arrived, the team began supplying the depot with the basics needed to accomplish the mission. Over the year, many of the depot’s buildings received a 100-year upgrade, facilities mentor Maj. Jim Wood said.

“We’ve repaired walls, both structurally and cosmetically, add-

Afghan Soldiers and civilian metal workers ply their trade in renovated shops and warehouses at Kabul’s central maintenance depot. But the buildings are 140-years old.

ed windows, doors, roofing and electrical capabilities,” the major said.

The depot is undergoing a complete renovation. With all the work going on, it resembles a boomtown with industrious construction workers galore hammering nails and digging trenches for electrical cables. As the upgrade continues, pristine and clean buildings are replacing those that show years of wear and tear.

The massive facelift makes for better working conditions, which hasn’t gone unnoticed.

“I’m so impressed how the (ETT) always pays attention to cleanliness and order,” depot deputy commander Col. Mohamad Usman said.

The Afghan Soldier said that with time, patience and effort, the mentors have established and fostered a good working relation-



Discussing what it took to build a new firing range at the Afghan army's central maintenance depot in Kabul are (from left) Staff Sgt. Falsen Cambre, Maj. James Wood and Staff Sgt. Carlos Diaz.

ship with their Afghan counterparts.

"They [Americans] are friendly and I've enjoyed our effective relationship," Colonel Usman said. "They have increased my leadership experience."

The strong working bond and better working conditions are noticeable, in part, because the Airmen emphasize safety first.

"Our team always stresses safety," team member Senior Master Sgt. Bill Cole said. "Safety is, without a doubt, our No. 1 priority."

The team has implemented new safety practices, many that were previously nonexistent. For example, workers now keep manufacturing machines clean and well maintained.

The Afghan officer in charge of the machine shop endorses the new safety processes.

"I'm impressed by this concept," Lt. Col. Mohammad Asif said. "A safe environment provides the workers with the opportunity to produce good work."

Production up

Producing good work is something in which Haji Abdulraof prides himself. He's been a machinist for 46 years. The changes are making Afghans at the depot more productive.

"I like standing behind a machine and producing something of value," Mr. Abdulraof said. "This environment is much better than the one we worked in before."

The machinist is proud of depot improvements. Each one is another step toward the eventual renewal of his country, he said.

Sergeant Cole said a safe work environment, something in which the Air Force prides itself, not only allows for better production, it also allows taking care "of the most valuable resources, people."

The Airmen — who come from such career fields as civil engineering, security forces, communications and vehicle and aircraft maintenance — pride themselves in knowing their Kabul experience will help a nation. And it will leave them an indelible impression.

"This [type of experience] stays with you forever," Major Wood said.

Team leader Lt. Col. Mike Hinz said the deployment also allows the Airmen a one-of-a-kind opportunity to establish friendships and cement bonds with the Afghans.

"This is by far the most unique assignment in our careers," Colonel Hinz said. "We're truly embedded with the Afghans. Even with our cultural differences, we've been working and training well. We have a good rapport and a trusting friendship."

Friendship aside, the depot's compound is overflowing with examples of well-done work. It is the kind of work that is starting to make a significant difference for the Afghan army, Major Wood said. Several key projects enhanced the depot's ability to do its important mission.

On target

One project was the construction of a new test-firing range. Major Wood and Sergeant Cambre turned to Air Force instructions to help complete the project. Once done, the range allowed the Afghan military "to test the weapons in a safe environment," Sergeant Cambre said.

The range is a long cement tunnel that allows two shooters



Establishing good working relationships with Afghan Soldiers is an important part of Staff Sgt. Falsen Cambre job as a mentor. The

sergeant is helping establish work procedures at the central maintenance depot's weapon repair shop.

at once to test their weapons. The range has lights, ventilation shafts and deflector plates. It's this kind of achievement that allowed the Airmen mentors to leave an indelible mark on their Afghan brethrens' commitment to duty.

His depot experiences remind Sergeant Marasse of a major Air Force principle.

"If flexibility is the key to air power, then this job is the epitome of that flexibility," he said.

Sergeant Cole said the same ability they demonstrate to modify and adapt gives him faith in the future of the Afghan military and people.

"Our final goal is for the next generation of Afghan children to be able to thrive in their country's environment and economy," he said.

Because of teamwork — like that taking place at the Kabul depot between the Airmen and their Afghan counterparts — the sergeant believes that goal will one day be a reality. ♡